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Agalega Island: India's Strategic Foothold in the Indian Ocean

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ABSTRACT

Agalega Island, a remote Mauritian territory in the western Indian Ocean, has emerged as a key node in India's evolving maritime strategy. This paper explores how India's infrastructure development on Agalega fits into its broader foreign policy objectives, particularly within the frameworks of SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region) and the Indo-Pacific strategy. The study examines five critical dimensions: the island's contribution to India's maritime posture, its impact on India–Mauritius relations, its alignment with India's regional doctrines, global responses to India's presence, and the apparent transition in India's foreign policy from soft power diplomacy to strategic assertiveness. Using a qualitative approach that draws from policy documents, official statements, strategic analysis, and media reports, this article situates Agalega within the larger geopolitical contest for influence in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). The findings suggest that while India continues to emphasise developmental diplomacy and partnership, the Agalega initiative marks a calculated shift toward enhancing maritime power projection. The paper also highlights the need for transparent engagement with regional partners and affected communities to balance strategic imperatives with diplomatic sensitivity.

KEYWORDS: *Agalega, India's foreign policy, Indian Ocean Region, SAGAR, Indo-Pacific, India–Mauritius relations, maritime strategy, strategic island diplomacy.*

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INTRODUCTION

The Indian Ocean Region (IOR) has emerged as one of the most strategically significant arenas in global geopolitics. With nearly 80% of global maritime trade passing through this region, control over key chokepoints and island territories has become central to the strategic calculus of regional and extra-regional powers. In this context, India's increasing focus on strengthening its maritime presence through partnerships, infrastructure development, and strategic outreach forms a vital component of its evolving foreign policy.

One such development is India's deepening engagement with Agalega Island, a remote territory of the Republic of Mauritius located over 1,000 kilometers north of Mauritius' main islands. Traditionally isolated and underdeveloped, Agalega has recently gained attention due to significant Indian-funded infrastructure projects widely perceived as facilitating India's future logistical or military access in the western Indian Ocean.

While official narratives emphasize development cooperation and capacity building under the umbrella of the SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region) doctrine, geopolitical analysts increasingly view Agalega as a critical asset in India's broader Indo-Pacific strategy. This dual interpretation, development vs. strategic posturing, lies at the heart of regional debates on India's foreign policy direction.

This paper seeks to critically examine India's activities on Agalega Island as a case study of strategic island diplomacy. It aims to address five key research questions – the first, on how does Agalega Island contribute to India's broader maritime strategy in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR)? Second, what are the foreign policy implications of India's infrastructure development on Agalega Island for India–Mauritius bilateral relations? Third, how does India's presence in Agalega align with its Indo-Pacific vision and the SAGAR (Security and Growth

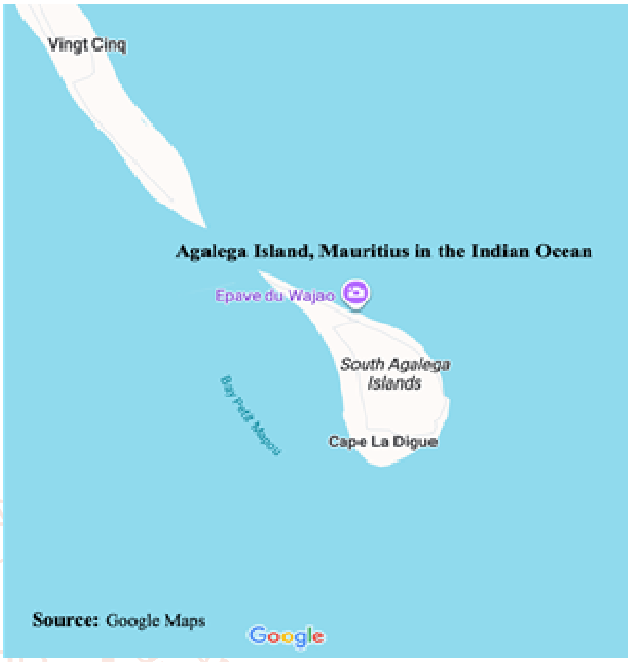
for All in the Region) doctrine? Fourth, what are the strategic concerns of other regional and global powers regarding India's activities on Agalega Island? Finally, to what extent does the Agalega project represent a shift in India's approach from soft power diplomacy to strategic assertiveness in the Indian Ocean?

Literature Review

Scholars and analysts have increasingly examined India's expanding role in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR), particularly following the launch of the SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region) initiative. Strategic experts like David Brewster, C. Raja Mohan, and Harsh V. Pant have explored India's maritime rise through naval diplomacy and strategic partnerships with island nations such as Mauritius, Seychelles, and Sri Lanka, often viewing these efforts as a counterbalance to China's growing influence. Think tank reports from the Observer Research Foundation (ORF) and the Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (IDSA) have discussed Agalega within broader maritime security contexts but tend to rely on official narratives, leaving public concerns and local perspectives underexplored. In contrast, international media and independent researchers have questioned the transparency and dual-use potential of India's Agalega projects, with investigations like Al Jazeera's *India's Secret Island Base* suggesting possible military uses despite official denials. Comparative analyses have drawn parallels between Agalega and strategically significant locations such as Diego Garcia, noting differences in diplomatic approach. Despite these discussions, there remains limited academic focus on Agalega as a distinct case study, insufficient examination of its role within the SAGAR and Indo-Pacific frameworks, a lack of integration between strategic, diplomatic, and developmental perspectives, and minimal critical engagement with regional and global reactions. This study seeks to fill these gaps by placing Agalega at the nexus of India's maritime foreign policy, strategic island diplomacy, and regional power projection, offering a comprehensive, balanced, and fact-based understanding of its significance.

India's Strategic Goals in the Indian Ocean

India has always recognised the importance of the Indian Ocean for its security and trade. Most of India's oil and goods pass through sea routes in this ocean.[1] Because of this, India wants to make sure these waters are safe and free for all. Over time, India's foreign policy has started to focus more on the ocean as a key part of its national interest. India depends heavily on sea trade. Important shipping lanes pass through the Indian Ocean, including near places like the Strait of Hormuz, the Gulf of Aden, and the Strait of Malacca. Any threat to these areas could hurt India's economy and energy supply.[2] So, India wants to protect these routes and stop pirates, smugglers, or enemy navies from causing trouble.



India wants to be seen as a helpful power in the region not just for its own benefit, but also to support neighboring countries.[3] This idea is part of India's "Net Security Provider" role. It means helping others with coast guard training, naval patrols, and humanitarian help during natural disasters. Building strong ties with island nations helps India achieve this. In recent years, China has increased its naval activities in the Indian Ocean. It has built ports and bases in countries like Pakistan (Gwadar), Sri Lanka (Hambantota), and Djibouti.[4] This has worried India. To balance China's influence, India is also looking to increase its reach in the region. Strategic islands like Agalega give India a base to monitor the western part of the Indian Ocean.

India has signed agreements with many countries to improve naval cooperation. This includes joint exercises, sharing information, and access to ports.[5] Agalega Island adds another point on the map where India can cooperate with Mauritius and nearby nations. It can help India act quickly during emergencies, protect trade, and support friends. A key part of modern foreign policy is to project power not by force, but by showing presence. Agalega could allow India to refuel ships, land aircraft, or station security teams if needed.[6] This is called a "forward operating presence." It shows strength without building a full military base.

Agalega in the Context of India–Mauritius Relations

Agalega fits perfectly into all these goals. It is located in the western Indian Ocean, far from mainland India. From there, India can watch shipping routes and keep an eye on naval movements in the area.[7] It also strengthens ties with Mauritius, a friendly country with deep historical links to India. Although Indian officials say the work in Agalega is for development purposes, like helping local people with better transport and infrastructure, many experts believe it also serves strategic aims.[8] The long runway being built is large enough for military planes. A new jetty can support big ships. These facilities would help India respond faster to threats or support nearby allies.

India and Mauritius share a long and friendly relationship. This friendship is based on cultural ties, shared history, and strong cooperation. Many people in Mauritius are of Indian origin, and India has always supported the country through trade, education, healthcare, and development aid. The Agalega project is one example of this growing partnership. Mauritius has a large Indian diaspora, and Hindi is taught in many schools there.[9] Indian festivals, music, and traditions are part of daily life in Mauritius. Because of these cultural ties, Mauritius is often seen as a "natural partner" in India's foreign policy, especially in the Indian Ocean Region. India and Mauritius have signed several agreements over the years from trade and defence to people-to-people exchanges. India has also helped Mauritius with building roads, providing medicines, offering scholarships, and training police and military forces.

In 2015, India and Mauritius signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) to allow India to help with the development of Agalega Island. According to official statements, this project includes the construction of a longer airstrip for planes to land, a modern jetty for ships, and storage and communication facilities.[10] The goal is to improve connectivity between the two islands of Mauritius and support the people living in Agalega. India also provides coastal radar systems and helps train Mauritian naval officers as part of broader defense cooperation.[11]

While both governments describe the project as development-oriented, there have been concerns among Mauritian citizens and activists. Some worry that India might use Agalega for military purposes without openly discussing it. Others fear that the local population of Agalega, which is small and isolated, has not been properly consulted.[12] There have been protests and media reports asking for more transparency and public debate. The governments of India and Mauritius, however, continue to state that the development is peaceful and meant to benefit both sides.

Despite the concerns, Agalega has deepened the India–Mauritius strategic partnership. It shows that Mauritius trusts India with long-term infrastructure development.[13] For India, this trust is important as it allows India to expand its presence in the Indian Ocean without causing alarm. India has always claimed that it does not believe in building overseas military bases. Instead, it uses soft diplomacy and partnerships to achieve its goals. Agalega follows this model, but the infrastructure gives India access and readiness if needed. Agalega represents India's unique style of diplomacy like combining cultural ties, development support, and strategic cooperation. Instead of pressuring smaller nations, India offers help and builds trust over time. For Mauritius, this relationship brings benefits like infrastructure, training, and economic help. For India, it ensures a reliable partner in a key part of the Indian Ocean.

India's Regional Doctrines

India's approach to the Indian Ocean is shaped by two key foreign policy ideas — the SAGAR doctrine and the Indo-Pacific vision. Both aim to promote peace, security, and growth in cooperation with other countries in the region. SAGAR, which stands for Security and Growth for All in the Region, was introduced by Prime Minister Narendra Modi in 2015. It commits India to keeping the Indian Ocean safe, not only for itself but also for all regional nations.[14] Its priorities include combating threats such as piracy and smuggling, assisting neighbours during disasters, building trust through joint projects, and promoting economic growth by improving trade and transport. Agalega Island plays an important role in this vision, as its new runway and jetty provide a strategic location for faster humanitarian and security missions.[15]

The Indo-Pacific vision sees the broader region as a vital space for global trade, security cooperation, and balance of power. It emphasises freedom of navigation, respect for international law, inclusive collaboration, and preventing dominance by any single country.[16] Agalega strengthens India's presence in the western Indian Ocean, allowing it to safeguard key shipping lanes, respond to emergencies, and work with partners like France, Australia, and the United States. Together with other initiatives such as radar and coast guard support for the Maldives and Seychelles, port development with Sri Lanka and Mauritius, and agreements with Oman and Iran, Agalega helps fill a strategic gap in India's

maritime network, especially along Africa's east coast.[17]

India has publicly described its Agalega project as a development effort focused on partnership with Mauritius. However, analysts note that the scale and design of the facilities suggest they could serve strategic purposes. The long airstrip is capable of handling large aircraft, and the jetty can accommodate naval vessels. Even without a permanent military presence, these assets give India the option to act quickly in response to threats or disasters. This dual-use capability reflects India's preference for quiet strategic positioning rather than overt militarization.[18]

The project has received mixed responses. The government of Mauritius has supported it, highlighting the benefits of new infrastructure for local residents. Yet, some civil society groups and island inhabitants have raised concerns about possible military use, limited public consultation, and loss of control over the territory.[19] Protests and media calls for more transparency have revealed a gap between official positions and public trust. India, for its part, maintains that the facilities are for humanitarian and cooperative purposes.

Global Responses and India's soft power diplomacy

Other countries are also paying attention. China has not commented officially but is likely monitoring developments closely, as Agalega strengthens India's ability to watch Chinese movements in the Indian Ocean.[20] Members of the Quad welcome India's increased capabilities in the region. The U.S., France, and Australia already have strategic interests and facilities in the Indian Ocean, and India's role complements their efforts to maintain a stable balance of power.[21] Some African coastal states may also benefit from India's greater ability to provide assistance and security support.

The Agalega development reflects a broader shift in India's foreign policy from purely soft power diplomacy to a blend of soft power and strategic assertiveness.[22] For decades, India relied on cultural exchange, education, development aid, and peaceful engagement to build influence. In recent years, it has added measures such as building strategic infrastructure, expanding naval reach, forming security partnerships like the Quad, and using its forces for both humanitarian and security purposes.[23] The Agalega airstrip and jetty are prime examples of dual-use infrastructure, allowing India to operate in the western Indian Ocean without the political sensitivities of an overt military base.[24]

This approach mirrors global practices, where strategic islands are used to project influence such as the U.S. base at Diego Garcia or France's facilities in its overseas territories. Unlike others, India frames its presence in terms of cooperation and mutual benefit, avoiding domination while securing access to vital locations. Agalega shows how India is balancing its peaceful image with the need to protect its interests, signalling its evolution into a more confident and prepared regional power.

Objectives

The main objective of this research is to explore the strategic importance of Agalega Island in India's foreign and maritime policy. It aims to understand how the development of infrastructure on Agalega fits into India's broader goals in the Indian Ocean Region under the SAGAR initiative. The study also seeks to examine the geopolitical implications of India's presence on the island, particularly in relation to China's growing influence and regional security dynamics. Additionally, the research intends to analyze the concerns of Mauritius and the international community regarding transparency, sovereignty, and the possible military use of Agalega facilities.

Methodology

This research follows a qualitative approach using secondary data sources. The study relies on document analysis of official statements, bilateral agreements, and policy papers from India and Mauritius. It also includes a review of academic journals, think tank reports, satellite imagery, and credible media articles to understand the developments on Agalega Island. A case study method is used to compare Agalega with other strategic island bases such as Diego Garcia and Assumption Island. Informal interviews with foreign policy experts and security analysts provided deeper insights into the strategic relevance of Agalega. The aim was to combine factual data with critical analysis to understand the island's role in India's foreign and maritime policy.

Results

The study finds that India's projects on Agalega Island give it a clear strategic advantage in the western Indian Ocean. Satellite images and policy documents confirm that the new 3-kilometre runway and deep-water jetty can handle large military aircraft and naval vessels, boosting India's ability to monitor sea lanes and respond quickly to regional crises. Interviews and media analysis show that while Mauritian officials publicly welcome the development for its economic benefits, local residents and civil-society groups remain uneasy about possible military use and limited consultation. Comparative

analysis with islands like Diego Garcia and Djibouti reveals that Agalega follows a "dual-use" model—officially civilian but readily adaptable for defence—reflecting India's broader shift from soft power to quiet strategic assertiveness. Overall, the findings suggest that Agalega strengthens India's maritime posture but also underscores the need for greater transparency to maintain trust with Mauritius and regional partners.

The development of Agalega Island marks a significant turning point in India's approach to regional strategy. While India has long used soft power tools like development aid and cultural diplomacy, the infrastructure on Agalega shows a quiet shift toward hard power and strategic presence. This island allows India to better monitor vital sea routes, counter Chinese influence, and secure its maritime interests in the western Indian Ocean. However, the lack of clear communication about the island's full purpose has led to suspicion both within Mauritius and in the international community. Balancing strategic goals with regional goodwill will be key. India must ensure that its actions support both security and partnership, keeping with its image as a responsible regional power.

Importance

Agalega Island holds great importance for India's strategic, diplomatic, and maritime goals in the Indian Ocean Region. It provides India with a forward operating base that can enhance surveillance, boost naval mobility, and ensure a quick response to regional threats. The island also strengthens India's ties with Mauritius, a key partner in the region, and shows India's commitment to the SAGAR vision of regional security and development. In a time when China is expanding its influence through port projects and military bases, Agalega gives India a much-needed edge in maintaining balance and ensuring free and open sea routes. Its development marks a major step in India's rise as a maritime power.

Conclusion

Agalega Island has become a key part of India's strategic outreach in the Indian Ocean. Through the development of infrastructure like the long runway and jetty, India is strengthening its maritime presence while maintaining close ties with Mauritius. This move reflects a shift in India's foreign policy from traditional soft power to a more strategic and security-focused approach. While India claims its activities are for regional development and cooperation, the dual-use potential of the facilities raises concerns about military intentions. Balancing strategic goals with transparency and respect for partner countries' sovereignty will be crucial for India to maintain trust and leadership in the region.

Policy Recommendations

India's activities on Agalega Island reflect its increasing role in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). To make sure these actions are effective, respectful, and sustainable, a few important policy steps are needed.

- There should be clear communication about what India is doing on the island. Both the Indian and Mauritian governments need to explain the purpose of the development, such as the runway and jetty. They should reassure local communities and international observers that the activities are peaceful. Regular updates should be shared to avoid misunderstandings or the spread of false information. Being open and transparent will help build trust and strengthen diplomatic relations between the two countries and with the region.
- The people of Agalega must benefit directly from the development. India and Mauritius should work together to improve healthcare, education, and transport on the island. Training and jobs should be provided to the local youth, and care should be taken to protect the environment and local traditions. Development must not come at the cost of the local community's welfare. It should be inclusive and focused on improving lives.
- India must treat Mauritius as an equal partner in all matters related to Agalega. Decisions about any military or strategic use of the island must be taken jointly. India should show respect for Mauritius' sovereignty and be sensitive to its political concerns. It should also support Mauritius in regional organizations like the African Union and the Indian Ocean Commission. A respectful and equal partnership will ensure a strong and long-lasting alliance.
- India should coordinate closely with other countries in the Indian Ocean Region. Its presence in Agalega should be used to support common goals. India can do this by conducting joint maritime patrols and security training, and by offering Agalega as a base for humanitarian and disaster relief operations. This cooperative approach will reduce fear among neighbouring countries and promote goodwill.
- The development of Agalega must be in line with India's SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region) vision. This means using the island to promote peace rather than military power. It should serve as a place to help small island nations, improve maritime safety, monitor the

environment, and support blue economy activities. India must show that it is a responsible regional leader that aims to benefit all.

- India must increase domestic awareness about the Agalega project. The government should involve experts, researchers, and civil society in discussing its goals and impact. The media should report accurately and responsibly. Parliament should also examine the project and ensure transparency. This will make foreign policy more democratic and protect India's long-term interests.
- India must regularly assess whether its activities on Agalega are achieving their intended results. It should check if the infrastructure is meeting its strategic goals and watch how other powers like China, France, and the United States are reacting. If the regional situation changes, India must be ready to adapt its approach. Being flexible and forward-looking will help India stay prepared and successful in the IOR.

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